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ABSTRACT

Student teaching is a powerful and formative experience for people entering the teaching profession. Student teachers must reorient their value systems wherever the conflict in values is encountered. This places many new teachers in training in a situation similar to that of acculturating populations all over the world. The high school in Ferndale (Washington) borders the Lummi Indian reservation. Many American Indians have attended Ferndale, and they have many stories of anti-Indian attitudes and behaviors among its teachers and within nearby Western Washington University, which educates many teachers for Ferndale schools. Documentary evidence corroborated the Indian community's stories. The prevalence of racist attitudes at Western Washington University has influenced the attitudes of teachers at Ferndale High School by transmitting Eurocentric cultural values and legitimizing knowledge/power relations. Many educators and administrators might dismiss the stories circulating throughout tribal communities as legend or exaggeration. However, these narratives reveal much about the substrata of Indian-White relations, and the issues of Indian schooling can best be understood by listening to these stories. Without having information about the historic and political climate of an institution, educators will continue to be bewildered that their programs are so unenthusiastically received by tribal communities. By acknowledging the truth of narratives about racism and anti-Indian ideologies, educators will be in a much better position to initiate and advocate programs that incorporate American Indian perspectives. (TD)

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The Enduring Native Narrative and Community Perceptions of Higher Education

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RC 023 655

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THE ENDURING NATIVE NARRATIVE AND COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Michael Marker

Northwest Indian College and
The University of British
Columbia.

I think that the first time I heard this story it was from my grandfather. Most of his stories, like this one, had a strong didactic element in them:

> A man is walking through the town late at night and sees another man on his hands and knees looking for something in the open clearing under the street lamp. The first man gets down on his hands and knees and begins to search alongside the second man. "What are you looking for?" says the first man. "My watch," says the other--"and I'm grateful for your help." After a while, the first man asks, "where did you lose it?" "I lost it back there in the bushes." "Well then why are you looking here?"... "The light is better."

When it comes to understanding aboriginal perspectives on post-secondary schooling, educators and university administrators tend to look in places where "the light is better" rather than look in the dark and elusive corners where the most potent issues lie. One of the most unexamined or ignored sources for learning about Native perspectives on a particular college or university is the stories Indian students and former students tell about classes, professors, and the ethnocentric attitudes that dominate the school environment.

I was at a meeting with the dean of the College of Education at Western Washington University trying to explore

possibilities for collaboration as Northwest Indian College initiates its first attempts at teacher education. The dean was insistent: "we have tried to do things with the Lummis in the past but they just don't ever seem to go anywhere." Two other education faculty members who were attending the meeting also agreed. They said that efforts to talk with the Lummi tribe and with the staff at Northwest Indian college had produced no concrete results; efforts to attract more Lummis, Swinomish, Nooksack, and other tribal peoples that Northwest Indian College serves had failed.

When I told the Western faculty that there were many stories told by Lummis and other Indian people about the university they shrugged it off as though it were useless to talk of such things. I told them that I had done a study of Lummi stories of schooling in the 1970s and that many of the perceptions of Western Washington University had persisted from that time to the present. The dean said, "around here we don't spend a lot of time dwelling on the past. We are more interested in the present and the future. We like to think positive."

I invited the dean and the faculty members to come to a lecture I was to give on the context and content of the stories about the university. I told them that it might help them to understand why there is such a negative impression of the educational possibilities for Native people at the university. My talk was sponsored by the departments of

Anthropology, Political Science, and the Society of Professional Journalists; it was held in Western's Library lecture hall. Although they said they might come, neither the dean nor the two faculty members attended my presentation. Had they come, they would have heard me talk about a case study which came out of my Ph.D. dissertation research on the ethnohistory of Lummi Education. It serves as an example--and not the most extreme example--of what I was trying to clarify.

The Lummis are a Coast Salish people who were among the victors in the 1974 U.S. vs. Washington trial over treaty fishing rights. The case is known as the "Boldt decision" because the determination was rendered by District Judge George H. Boldt. Boldt, after studying nineteenth-century legal dictionaries, decided that, by the 1855 Point Elliot Treaty, Puget Sound tribes had "granted the white settlers the right to fish beside them" and that the Indians had reserved 50 percent of the harvestable fish for themselves. This re-allocated the Puget Sound salmon fishery and provoked a storm of protest from outraged white fishermen. A large number of these fishermen were teachers in public schools and universities. They fished during the summer and taught during the school year.

In researching the ethnohistory of Lummi education, I was listening to stories of former Lummi students who had attended the local public high school in Ferndale during the

1970s. I was trying to understand the extreme anti-Indian attitudes of some of the teachers there. Indignation over the fishing rights victories had certainly driven some of the hostility, but it seemed to be more of an excuse for expressing anti-Indian sentiment than a primary cause of attitudes about Lummis. Lummis told me to look at the university in Bellingham if I wanted to understand the values and perspectives of the teachers at Ferndale.

The town of Ferndale is five miles away from the Lummi Reservation. Most Lummis attend school in Ferndale and have been bussed there since the 1950s when the Lummi Day School was closed down by the Ferndale superintendent of schools. Many of the teachers at Ferndale completed their teaching certificates at Western Washington University; the impressive brick buildings of Western can be seen directly across Bellingham Bay from the Lummi Reservation.

At Ferndale High School during the 1970s and 1980s there were two kinds of teachers: ineffectual, often liberal, ones who were unable to deal with the climate of racism, and anti-Indian ones who were referred to as "the good old boys." The most progressive teachers tried to create "safe classrooms" for Lummi students. The teachers who were most prejudiced against Indians were often fishermen. Both groups knew very little about their Indian pupils.

One teacher who came from the Midwest to teach at

Ferndale reported that he "didn't know anything about Indians. I had never seen one. When I got to the high school and saw Lummi students in the halls, I thought they must be Asian or maybe Eskimos. If I asked about Indian culture, well, people would come back to me and say 'culture, shit, the Lummis have no culture, the Lummis are just a bunch of losers. They're just a tribe down here on the coast that every other tribe along the western coast has come down and pillaged them--they're just a bunch of losers, they got no culture!' And that wasn't said with shame or apology. It was said as if that was historical fact."

As I talked with Lummis about the attitudes displayed by teachers during the 1970s the setting began to sound more like Mississippi than Washington State. Alvin Ziontz, a Seattle specialist in Indian Law, compared the "attitudes of some whites in western Washington with those of white Southerners fighting against open housing. Living in the Northwest makes people think they are good and things are different."[1]

Indian people I spoke with told me that I should look at Western Washington University if I wanted to know more about how teachers formed some of their ideas about Indian students. At first I thought of it more as a general statement about the "whiteman's institutions" of education; how they are all connected. I was a little reluctant to get

1. Rick Cocker, "Flagrant, subtle racism a fact of life for many." Bellingham Herald, 10 March 1977, 5.

into an examination of the university in Bellingham since I saw it mostly as a digression; I was determined to keep my study manageable focusing only on the high school. But, a number of people were insistent that I investigate the link between teacher attitudes at Ferndale and the teacher training program at Western. Finally, I was told a story, well known among Lummis, about a Western education professor who taught her students that Lummis were genetically inferior and therefore less intelligent. The story was told to me many times both on the Lummi reservation and, eventually, in the private offices of faculty at Western.

At the civil rights hearing held in Seattle on October 19-20, 1978, Sam Cagey, the tribal chairman, tried to tell the committee the story of professor Martha Smith[2] who was preaching racism. He reported that, "This is part of the education problem we face. This is in the old Western Washington State College, which is now a university ... one of its tenured professors ... was teaching to her students that Lummis cannot achieve beyond a certain point because they're descendents of slaves."[3] The committee stopped Sam

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2. A pseudonym. Although I have photocopies of notes giving her real name as well as testimony from a number of individuals who gave her name, I found no official or published documents with Dr. Smith's real name. I have chosen to not use her actual name, but to use a pseudonym instead.

3. Hearing before the United States Commission on Civil Rights. American Indian Issues In the State of Washington, Volume I: Testimony, Arthur S. Flemming, Chairman (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), 133.

Cagey from going into more detail and decided to discuss the matter in executive session.

Academic Freedom and Racist Propaganda

Student teaching is a powerful and formative experience for the person who is entering the teaching profession. A number of scholars have studied the way values are acquired by teachers as they are trained in the universities.[4] George Spindler noted that "the neophyte in training must reorient his value system wherever the conflict in values is encountered. This places many new teachers in training in a situation similar to that of acculturating populations all over the world."[5] Some of the attitudes about Lummi students were formed during teacher training and the Professor Sam Cagey referred to was supervising a substantial number of student teachers at Ferndale throughout the 1970s. I spoke with some of those teachers.

One woman who was being supervised at Ferndale High School in the early 1970s said that Professor Smith came to observe her in the classroom: "She said to me--in the hall at Ferndale High School--privately--that when northern

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4. See Gerry Rosenfeld, "Shut Those Thick Lips" (Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1983), 109; Young Pai, Cultural Foundations of Education (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill Publishing Company, 1990), 171; and George D. Spindler, The Transmission of American Culture (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 20-28.

5. George D. Spindler, "The Acculturation of the School Teacher," in Society and Education: Readings, ed. James Raths and Jean Dresden Grambs (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1965), 128.

tribes raided Lummi for slaves, the most intelligent Lummis were captured, leaving less intelligent people who formed the majority of the community. Because of this, Lummi students have learning difficulties."

At Ferndale, a man who was under Dr. Smith's supervision reported that "I was sitting in a classroom--I was a student teacher--and my supervisor from the college was sitting beside me. I was correcting some papers while the regular classroom teacher was conducting the class. It was a science class. And, my supervisor looked at me and said 'don't worry about the Indian kids, they're genetically inferior.' I said, 'what are you talking about?' and she said, 'a long time ago there were slave raids and they took the smart ones and left the dumb ones to breed.' It kind of made me boil inside--I was real angry and upset--but I'd put up with an awful lot to become a teacher and one wrong comment to her ... I knew many teachers that were good teachers got washed up if they didn't agree with her values. I was in a bind. Other good potential teachers were black-balled, so to speak, because they would argue with her when she would come on with some of her ridiculous ideas."

Another woman stated that "those were the days when you had to say everything was fine and just grin--if you wanted a job. Anything that went into your file stayed in your file permanently. So, a bad word from Martha Smith meant down the tubes. She had a lot of clout in this state."

Finally, in 1976, a sufficient number of complaints from students and Lummi parents had been lodged and a hearing was held at Western Washington University. I spoke with a faculty member from the school of education who was at that hearing. I also spoke with a student who represented the Native American Student Union (NASU) at the meeting; she made photocopies of her notes for me. The Indian representatives at the meeting wanted nothing less than Dr. Smith's resignation, but, as the faculty member I spoke to reported, "Martha argued for academic freedom citing the Jensen studies[6] and saying that 'common sense should prevail as no Lummi Indian has accomplished anything--including graduating from college.'" The committee took no action and Professor Smith was allowed to continue supervising student teachers through the end of the decade.

Many people at Western know of the above incident, but most are reluctant to talk about it. It is clear that Western Washington University was directly involved in influencing the attitudes of teachers at Ferndale High School by transmitting cultural values and legitimizing knowledge\power relations. Without listening to the narratives of Lummis and their former teachers, I would not have uncovered this incident; it was never reported in the

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6. In 1969 Arthur R. Jensen launched an IQ controversy by publishing "How Much Can We Boost IQ and Scholastic Achievement?" in the Harvard Educational Review 39 (Winter), 1-123, also Straight Talk About Mental Tests (New York: Free Press, 1981). Jensen argued that 80 percent of intelligence is inherited.

local newspaper or in the campus paper.

A faculty member found himself caught a bit off guard and away from the campus when I told him about my knowledge of this notorious incident. I told him that it looked as if the whole educational system cooperated with the way the Ferndale schools treated their Lummi students. He then blurted out: "Of course we were complicit! We were placing a lot of student teachers there [Ferndale]; we needed them" (referring to the education department needing Ferndale School District for the placement of student teachers).

The Anti-Indian Climate at Western

Ordinarily, it would be difficult to explain how a professor, who taught that Indians were genetically inferior, could be tolerated so quietly at one of Washington state's most prominent teacher training institutions. But, the climate of the university in the 1970s was full of the tensions of the fishing wars and anti-Indian rhetoric was commonplace in the local newspapers giving a quasi-legitimacy to feelings of vexation about Indians. A number of faculty were fishermen: the chairman of the psychology department, who became dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, was president of the gilnetters' association which was notoriously anti-Indian at this time.[7]

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7. The Northwest Passage, July 8-29, 1974, 7, reported that the Puget Sound Gillnetters Association had recently voted "more money to the 'war chest' to fight the Indians."

Other professors at Western expressed a subtle contempt for Indian treaties and Native perspectives as a whole. In a Western history class one Native student reported that, "he [the professor] was talking about the validity of the treaties and how they were not documents of real stature....he said, 'people were making treaties with drunken Indians.'"[8] Attitudes like this were not just born overnight with the fishing controversies, but they were embedded in the personal views of faculty and students who had very limited knowledge of Indian tribal groups.

One Indian woman, a member of NASU, reported on her daily encounters with white students at Western:

> As long as people think I'm a Mexican, it's all right, but when I tell them I'm an Indian!...It's more a tone of voice." She raised her brows and mimicked a mythical white student, distinctly enunciating each word. "Are you REALLY an Indian? Do you come from around HERE? What's it like to be an INDIAN in college?" The difficult part is their surprise and shock--of, God, an Indian really made it to college.[9]

Native political gains of the 1970s only provoked and gave an excuse for more blatant anti-Indian expressions. For a number of reasons, including an academic belief in the superiority of Western civilization, attempts to establish a

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See also John Brockhaus,"Rebellion on the Not-So-High Sea," Northwest Passage, October 11-25, 1976, 4. The author described a gillnetters association meeting and compared it to a Ku Klux Klan meeting.

8. Deanna Shaw, "Indian Education: Lost In America," Klipsun (student publication of Western Washington University), September 1985, 11.

9. Deanna Shaw, "Indian Education: Lost In America," 11.

Native American presence at Western were constantly being pushed back. An examination of the survival efforts of the College of Ethnic Studies, with its robust Native American studies component, reveals much about the resistance to Native prerogatives at Western.

Maurice Bryan, in his master's thesis, quotes a former president of Western Washington University explaining that racism and "closet bigots"[10] were significant factors in the dismantling of the College of Ethnic Studies, a program that had, from 1970 to 1972, the preeminent Indian scholar Vine Deloria, Jr. as a faculty member. The elimination of the college made a symbolic statement that genuine Indian perspectives were not welcome on the Western campus.

With the College of Ethnic Studies eliminated only the Native American Student Union (NASU) was left to protest against the uninformed and prejudiced teachings about Indian people. Non-Native students at the university had virtually no knowledge about Native peoples and, hence, scant ability to question the subtle prejudices and racist teachings of their professors. This university, a place one counsellor called "a bastion of whiteness with a history of blatant and subtle discrimination against Indians," was educating many of the teachers for the Ferndale schools.[11] I am convinced

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10. Maurice L. Bryan, Jr., "The College of Ethnic Studies at Western Washington University: A Case Study" (Master's Thesis, Western Washington University, 1993), 93.

11. Ibid, 13.

now, as so many Lummis have insisted from the beginning, that Western Washington University played a large role in perpetuating stereotypes and negative attitudes about Indians. Even if some beginning teachers rejected the prejudiced opinions of their professors, some did not.

The narratives that resonate throughout tribal communities about the political climate of a university is a kind of oral tradition. Many educators and administrators might dismiss such stories as legend or exaggeration. In my research, I found that the stories about anti-Indian attitudes at Western Washington University were very true. When placed alongside the documentary evidence, the stories seem to actually be understatements as they are testimony of the resiliency of Indian people to maintain their identity in the midst of such an institutional assault.

Currently there are other stories that are being told about problems for Indian people at Western Washington University. A professor at Western's Fairhaven College has been teaching a class on "experiential shamanism."[12] Tribal people from Lummi and Swinomish have been asking that this class not continue because of numerous problems having to do with context, authority, and, perhaps most importantly, respect. The professor has claimed the right to "academic freedom." The stories that revolve around this particular

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12. See Leslie Conton, "Experiential Shamanism in the College Classroom: Rewards and Challenges," Anthropology of Consciousness 7, No.1 (March, 1996) : 39-47.

case deserve special attention--and, perhaps a separate paper. But, it is significant to consider that perhaps the assault Native people have experienced from racist teachings are not substantively different from the current violations of "new age" gurus attempting to appropriate aboriginal spirituality. Both offer simplistic explanations of American Indian cultural identity. And, both create barriers to Indian people feeling that their perspectives are welcome and respected in the academy. To characterize Native people as exotic does no less harm than to portray them as genetically deficient.

Narratives about schooling in border towns--towns that border Indian reservations--reveal much about the sub-strata of Indian-white relations. Ethnographic studies that are analytical with regard to cultural values and power relations in these communities are vital first steps in the process of advocating policy and initiating educational projects. A good example of this kind of "macro-ethnography" is Donna Deyhle's work with Navajo youth. She brings forth the stories of both Navajos and Anglos and tests their fit within the theoretical templates of Ogbu, Erickson, Cummins and others. Her work provides an important reference and guide for anyone wanting to engage with Navajo education[13].

Tracing the sources of cultural transmission and

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13. Donna Deyhle, "Navajo Youth and Anglo Racism: Cultural Integrity and Resistance," Harvard Educational Review, 65, No.3 (Fall 1995) : 403-444.

attitudes of the teachers leads to an examination of the teacher training institutions in the region. This is where many important narratives about cross-cultural education can be found. These accounts along with the stories of Indian students and tribal community members provide the deepest and richest information about a setting. Educators and administrators who are willing to listen to these narratives will be in a much better position to initiate and advocate programs which might incorporate American Indian perspectives rather than ignore them. The deep and shadowy issues of Indian schooling can best be understood by listening to these stories. Without having information about the historic and political climate of an institution, educators will continue to be bewildered that their programs are so unenthusiastically received by tribal Communities. By acknowledging the genuineness of narratives about racism and anti-Indian ideologies, educators can gain access to a deeper layer of the cross-cultural landscape. Trying to develop programs without listening to and learning from these narratives is like looking only where the light is good.

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